# Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car

# John Updike

DIFFERENT THINGS move us. I, David Kern, am always affected—reassured, nostalgically pleased, even, as a member of my animal species, made proud—by the sight of bare earth that has been smoothed and packed firm by the passage of human feet. Such spots abound in small towns: the furtive break in the playground fence dignified into a thoroughfare, the trough of dust underneath each swing, the blurred path worn across a wedge of grass, the anonymous little mound or embankment polished by play and strewn with pebbles like the confetti aftermath of a wedding. Such unconsciously humanized intervals of clay, too humble and common even to have a name, remind me of my childhood, when one communes with dirt down among the legs, as it were, of presiding presences. The earth is our playmate then, and the call to supper has a piercing eschatological ring.

The corner where I now live was recently widened so that the cars going back and forth to the summer colony on the Point would not be troubled to slow down. My neighbor’s house was sold to the town and wrecked and picked clean by salvagers and finally burned in a great bonfire of old notched beams and splintered clapboards that leaped tree-high throughout one whole winter day’s cold drizzle. Then bulldozers, huge and yellow and loud, appeared on the street and began to gnaw, it seemed, at the corner of our house. My third child, a boy not yet two, came running from the window in tearful panic. After I tried to soothe him with an explanation, he followed me through the house sobbing and wailing “ ’Sheen! ’Sheen!” while the machines made our rooms shake with the curses of their labor. They mashed my neighbor’s foundation stones into the earth and trimmed the levelled lot just as my grandmother used to trim the excess dough from the edge of the pieplate. They brought the curve of the road right to the corner of my property, and the beaten path that does for a sidewalk in front of my home was sheared diagonally by a foot-high cliff.

Last night I was coming back from across the street, fresh from an impromptu civic lamentation with a neighbor at how unsightly, now that the snow was melted, the awkward-shaped vacant lot the bulldozers had left looked, with its high raw embankment gouged by rivulets and littered with old chimney bricks. And soon, we concluded, now that spring was here, it would be bristling with weeds. Crossing from this conversation, I noticed that where my path had been lopped the cliff no longer existed; feet—children’s feet, mostly, for mostly children walk in our town—had worn the sharpness away and molded a little ramp by which ascent was easier.

This small modification, this modest work of human erosion, seemed precious to me not only because it recalled, in the slope and set of the dirt, a part of the path that long ago had led down from my parents’ back yard to the high-school softball field. It seemed precious because it had been achieved accidentally, and had about it that repose of grace which is beyond willing. We in America have from the beginning been cleaving and baring the earth, attacking, reforming the immensity of nature we were given. We have explored, on behalf of all mankind, this paradox: the more matter is outwardly mastered, the more it overwhelms us in our hearts. Evidence—gaping right-of-ways, acres mercilessly scraped, bleeding mountains of muddy fill—surrounds us of a war that is incapable of ceasing, and it is good to know that now there are enough of us to exert a counter-force. If craters were to appear in our landscape tomorrow, the next day there would be usable paths threading down the blasted sides. As our sense of God’s forested legacy to us dwindles, there grows, in these worn, rubbed, and patted patches, a sense of human legacy—like those feet of statues of saints which have lost their toes to centuries of kisses. One thinks of John Dewey’s definition of God as the union of the actual and the ideal.

There was a time when I wondered why more people did not go to church. Taken purely as a human recreation, what could be more delightful, more unexpected than to enter a venerable and lavishly scaled building kept warm and clean for use one or two hours a week and to sit and stand in unison and sing and recite creeds and petitions that are like paths worn smooth in the raw terrain of our hearts? To listen, or not listen, as a poorly paid but resplendently robed man strives to console us with scraps of ancient epistles and halting accounts, hopelessly compromised by words, of those intimations of divine joy that are like pain in that, their instant gone, the mind cannot remember or believe them; to witness the windows donated by departed patrons and the altar flowers arranged by withdrawn hands and the whole considered spectacle lustrous beneath its patina of long use; to pay, for all this, no more than we are moved to give—surely in all democracy there is nothing like it. Indeed, it is the most available democratic experience. We vote less than once a year. Only in church and at the polls are we actually given our supposed value, the soul-unit of one, with its noumenal arithmetic of equality: one equals one equals one.

My preaching corrupts the words and corrupts me. Belief builds itself unconsciously and in consciousness is spent. Throughout my childhood I felt nothing in church but boredom and an oppressive futility. For reasons my father never explained, he was a dutiful churchman; my mother, who could use her senses, who had read Santayana and Wells, stayed home Sunday mornings, and I was all on her side, on the side of phenomena, in those years, though I went, with the other children, to Sunday school. It was not until we moved from the town and joined a country church that I, an adolescent of fifteen, my head a hotbed of girls and literature, felt a pleasant emotion in church. During Lent—that dull season, those forty gray days during which the earth prepares the resurrection that the church calendar seizes upon as conveniently emblematic—I ushered with my father at the Wednesday-night services. We would arrive in our old car—I think it was the ’38 Chevrolet then—on those raw March nights and it pleasantly surprised me to find the building warm, the stoked furnace already humming its devotions in the basement. The nave was dimly lit, the congregation small, the sermon short, and the wind howled a nihilistic counterpoint beyond the black windows blotted with garbled apostles; the empty pews, making the minister seem remote and small and emblematic, intensified our sensation of huddling. There was a strong sepia flavor of early Christianity: a minority flock furtively gathered within a dying, sobbing empire. From the rear, the broad back and baked neck of the occasional dutiful son loomed bullishly above the black straw hats of the mischievous-looking old ladies, gnarled by farmwork, who sat in their rows like withered apples on the shelves of a sweet-smelling cellar. My father would cross and uncross and recross his legs and stare at his thoughts, which seemed distant. It was pleasant to sit beside him in the rear pew. He was not much of a man for sitting still. When my parents and I went to the movies, he insisted on having the aisle seat, supposedly to give his legs room. After about twenty minutes he would leap up and spend the rest of the show walking around in the back of the theatre drinking water and talking to the manager while my mother and I, abandoned, consoled ourselves with the flickering giants of make-believe. He had nothing of the passive in him; a church always became, for him, something he helped run. It was pleasant, and even exciting, when the moment for action came, to walk by his side up the aisle, the thump of our feet the only sound in the church, and to take the wooden, felt-floored plates from a shy blur of white robes and to administer the submission of alms. Coins and envelopes sought to cover the felt. I condescended, stooping gallantly into each pew. The congregation seemed the Others, reaching, with quarters glittering in their fingers, toward mysteries in which I was snugly involved. Even to usher at a church mixes us with the angels, and is a dangerous thing.

The churches of Greenwich Village had this second-century quality. In Manhattan, Christianity is so feeble its future seems before it. One walks to church past clattering cafeterias and glowering news vendors in winter weather that is always a shade of Lent, on pavements spangled with last night’s vomit. The expectantly hushed shelter of the church is like one of those spots worn bare by a softball game in a weed-filled vacant lot. The presence of the city beats like wind at the glowing windows. One hastens home afterward, head down, hurrying to assume the disguise—sweaters and khaki pants—of a non-churchgoer. I tried not to go, but it was not in me not to go. I never attended the same church two Sundays in succession, for fear I would become known and be expected. To be known by face and name and financial weight robs us of our unitary soul, enrolls us against those Others. Devil’s work. We are the others. It is of the essence to be a stranger in church.

On the island the very color of my skin made me strange. This island had been abandoned to the descendants of its slaves. Their church was on a hill; it has since been demolished, I have learned from letters, by a hurricane. To reach it one climbed a steep path made treacherous by the loose rubble of coral rock, jagged gray clinkers that bore no visible relation to the pastel branches that could be plucked, still pliant, from the shallows by Maid’s Beach. Dull-colored goats were tethered along the path; their forelegs were tangled in their ropes so tightly that whenever they nodded the bush anchoring them nodded in answer. For windows the church possessed tall arched apertures filled not with stained glass but with air and outward vision; one could see the goats stirring the low foliage and the brightly dressed little girls who had escaped the service playing on the packed dirt around the church. The service was fatiguingly long. There were exhaustive petitionary prayers (for the Queen, the Prime Minister, Parliament) and many eight-versed hymns sung with a penetrating, lingering joy and accompanied by a hand-pumped organ. The organ breathed in and out, loud and soft, and the congregation, largely female, followed its ebb and flow at a brief but noticeable distance; their lips moved behind the singing, so I seemed immersed in an imperfectly synchronized movie. Musical stress, the West Indian accent, and elision worked upon the words a triple distortion. “Lait eth’s waadsa *cull* raio-ind …” Vainly seeking my place in the hymn—for without a visual key I was lost—I felt lifted within a warm, soughing milk, an aspiring chant as patient as the nodding of the goats.

Throughout the service, restless deacons slipped in and out of the windows. Bored myself—for we grow sated even with consolation—I discovered that without moving from my pew I too could escape through those tall portals built to admit the breeze. I rested my eyes on earth’s wide circle round. From this height the horizon of the sea was lifted halfway up the sky. The Caribbean seemed a steeply tilted blue plane to which the few fishing boats in the bay below had been attached like magnetized toys. God made the world, Aquinas says, in play.

Matter has its radiance and its darkness; it lifts and it buries. Things compete; a life demands a life. On another English island, in Oxford—it is a strange fact about Americans, that we tend to receive our supernatural mail on foreign soil—I helped a cat die. The incident had the signature: decisive but illegible. For years I did not tell my wife about it, for fear it would frighten her. Some hours before, I had left her at the hospital in the early stages of labor. Wearing a sterilized gown and mask, I had visited her in a white-tiled room along whose walls gleaming gutters stood ready to drain torrents of blood. Her face, scrubbed and polished, was fervent like a child’s, and she seemed, lying there swathed in white, ready for nothing so much as a graduation ceremony. She would break off talking, and listen as if to the distant voice of a schoolmistress, and her face would grow rapt, and when the contraction had passed she would sigh and say, “That was a good one,” and chatter some more to me of how I would feed myself alone and to whom I would send telegrams.

Shooed from the room, stripped of my mask, I tried to wait, and was told, the comical useless husband of American cartoons, to run on home; it would be “a time.” I went outside and took a bus home. It was the last day of March. I had been born in March, and had looked forward to welcoming my child to the month; but she was late. We lived on Iffley Road, and around midnight, for some reason—I think to mail a letter, but what letter could have been that important?—I was out walking a few blocks from our flat. The night was cold enough for gloves. The sensations of turning into a father (or, rather, the lack of sensations: the failure of sympathetic pain, the anesthetized dread, the postponement of pride) made the street seem insubstantial. There was not that swishing company of headlights that along an American road throws us into repeated relief. The brick homes, save for an occasional introverted glow in an upstairs window, were dark in their vehement English privacy behind the thatchy hedges and spiked walls. The streetlamps—wintry, reserved—drained color from everything. Myself a shadow, I noticed another in the center of the road. A puddle of black, as I watched, it curled on itself; its ends lifted from the macadam and seemed to stretch in a yawn. Then it became inert again. I was horrified; the shape was about the size of a baby. When it curled the second time, I went to it, my footsteps the only sound in the street.

It was a cat that had been struck by a car. Struck but not quite killed: a testament to the modest speed and sensible size of English automobiles. By the impersonal witness of the lamps burning in the trees I couldn’t be sure what color its fur was—it seemed orange-yellow, tabbied with stripes of dark ginger. The cat was plump and wore a collar. Someone had loved it. Blackness from one ear obscured one side of its head and when I touched here it was like a cup. For the third time, the cat stretched, the tips of its hind feet quivering luxuriously in that way cats have. With a great spastic effort it flipped over onto its other side, but made no cry. The only sound between us was my crooning as I carried it to the side of the street and laid it behind the nearest hedge.

A sallow upstairs light in this home was glowing. I wondered if the cat was theirs. Was it their love invested in my hands? Were they watching as I pushed, crouching, with my burden through their hedge? I wondered if I would be taken for a trespasser; as an American, I was nervous of English taboos. In my own country it was a not uncommon insult to kill a cat and throw the body into an enemy’s yard, and I was afraid that this might be taken that way. I thought of writing a note to explain everything, but I had no paper and pen. I explained to the cat, how I was taking her (I felt the cat was female) out of the street so no more cars would hit her, how I would put her here in the nice safe dirt behind the hedge, where she could rest and get well. I did not believe she would get well; I think she was dead already. Her weight had felt dead in my hands and when I laid her down she did not stretch or twitch again.

Back in my flat, I discovered that one glove was smeared with blood. Most of the palm and three of the fingers were dyed wine-brown. I hadn’t realized there was so much blood. I took off my gloves and carefully wrote a note, explaining that I had found this cat in the middle of the street, still alive, and that I had put it behind this hedge to be safe. If, as I thought, the cat was dead, I hoped that the finders would bury it. After some deliberation, I signed my name and address. I walked back and tucked the note under the cat’s body, which seemed at home behind the hedge; it suffered my intrusion a trifle stiffly. It suggested I was making too much fuss, and seemed to say to me, *Run on home*.

Back in my flat once more, I felt abruptly tired, though my heart was pounding. I went to bed and set the alarm for three and read a book. I remember the title, it was Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*. I turned off the light and prayed for my wife and, though I did not believe myself capable of it, fell asleep. The alarm at three came crashing into some innocent walk of a dream and my frail head felt like a hollow cup. I dressed and went out to the public phone booth a block away and called the hospital. A chirping voice, after some rummaging in the records, told me that several hours ago, in the first hour of April (in the United States it was still March), a perfect female infant had been born. To me.

The next morning, after all the telegrams had been managed, I went back to the hedge, and the cat and my note were gone. Though I had left my address, I never received a letter.

When we returned from England, we bought a car. We had ordered it through my parents from folders they had sent us, and though its shade of blue was more naïve, more like a robin’s egg, than we had expected, this ’55 Ford proved an excellent buy. Whether being shuffled from side to side of West Eighty-fifth Street every morning or being rammed in second gear up a washed-out mountain road in Vermont, it never complained. In New York hot tar from a roof-patching job rained onto its innocent paint, and in Vermont its muffler was racked and rent on a shelf of rock, and in Massachusetts it wallowed, its hot clutch stinking, up from more than one grave of snow. Not only sand and candy wrappers accumulate in a car’s interior, but heroisms and instants of communion. Americans make love in their cars, and listen to ball games, and plot their wooing of the dollar: small wonder the landscape is sacrificed to these dreaming vehicles of unitary personhood.

In the beginning, my wife and I would lovingly lave with soap and warm water the unflecked skin of the hood as if it were the thorax of a broad blue baby, and toward the end we let the gallant old heap rust where it would. Its eggshell finish grew grizzled with the stains of dropped maple seeds. Its doors balked at closing; its windows refused to roll down. But I somehow never believed we would ever trade it in, though the little girl born across the ocean in the ominous turning of April, now a vocal and status-conscious democrat of nearly six, applied more and more pressure. The deal was consummated while my soul had its face turned, and Detroit contracted to devour her offspring. But before the new car arrived, there was a month’s grace, and in this grace I enjoyed a final fling with my car, my first, my only—for all the others will be substitutes. It happened this way:

Dancing at a party with a woman not my wife, I took the opportunity to turn her hand in mine and kiss her palm. For some time her thighs had been slithering against mine, and, between dances, she developed a nervous clumsy trick of lurching against me, on tiptoe, and rubbing her breasts against my forearm, which was braced across my chest as I held a cigarette. My first thought was that I might burn her; my second, that Nature in her gruff maternal way had arranged one of her opportunities—as my mother, when I was a child, would unpredictably determine to give me a birthday or Halloween party. Obediently I bowed my head and kissed my friend’s moist palm. As it withdrew from the advance, her fingertips caressed my chin in the absent-minded manner of one fingering the muzzle of an importunate dog. The exchange transposed us into a higher key; I could hardly hear my own voice, and our dancing lost all connection with the music, and my hand explored her spine from a great aerial distance. Her back seemed mysteriously taut and hard; the body of a strange woman retains more of its mineral content, not yet being transmuted into memory. In a sheltered corner of the room we stopped dancing altogether and talked, and what I distinctly remember is how her hands, beneath the steady and opaque appraisal of her eyes, in agitation blindly sought mine and seized and softly gripped, with infantile instinct, my thumbs. Just my thumbs she held, and as we talked she moved them this way and that as if she were steering me. When I closed my eyes, the red darkness inside my lids was vibrant, and when I rejoined my wife, and held her to dance, she asked, “Why are you panting?”

After we got home, and surveyed our four children, and in bed read a few pages made unbearably brilliant by the afterglow of gin, and turned out the light, she surprised me by not turning her back. Alcohol, with its loosening effect, touches women more deeply than men in this respect; or perhaps, like a matched pair of tuning forks, I had set her vibrating. Irritated by whatever illicit stimulations, we took it out on each other.

To my regret, I survived the natural bliss of satiety—when each muscle is like a petal snugly curved within the corolla—and was projected onto the seething, azoic territory of insomnia. That feathery anxious embrace of my erect thumbs tormented me in twenty postures. My stomach turned in love of that woman; I feared I would be physically sick and lay on my back gingerly and tried to soothe myself with the caress of headlights as they evolved from bright slits on the wall into parabolically accelerating fans on the ceiling and then vanished: this phenomenon, with its intimations of a life beyond me, had comforted wakeful nights in my earliest childhood. It was small comfort now. In Sunday school long ago I had been struck by the passage in which Jesus says that to lust after a woman in thought is the same as committing adultery. I found myself helplessly containing the conviction that wishes, not deeds, are judged. To crave a sin was to commit it; to touch the brink was to be on the floor of the chasm. The universe that so easily permitted me to commit adultery became, by logical steps each one of which went more steeply down than the one above it, a universe that would easily permit me to die. The depths of cosmic space, the maddening distension of time, history’s forgotten slaughters, the child smothered in the dumped icebox, the recent breakdown of the molecular life-spiral, the proven physiological roots of the mind, the presence in our midst of idiots, Eichmanns, animals, and bacteria—all this evidence piled on, and I seemed already eternally forgotten. The dark vibrating air of my bedroom felt like the dust of my grave; the dust went up and up and I prayed upward into it, prayed, prayed for a sign, any glimmer at all, any microscopic loophole or chink in the chain of evidence, and saw none. I remembered a movie that had frightened me as a child; in it Jimmy Cagney, moaning and struggling, is dragged on rubber legs down the long corridor to the electric chair. I was that condemned man. My brain in its calcium vault shouted about injustice, thundered accusations into the lustreless and tranquil homogeneity of the air. Each second that my protest went unanswered justified it more certainly: the God who permitted me this fear was unworthy of existence. Each instant that my terror was extended amplified God’s non-existence, so, as the graph of certain equations fluctuates more and more widely as it moves along the lateral coördinate, or as the magnetic motive-power in atom-smashers accelerates itself, I was caught in a vortex whose unbearably shrill pitch moved me at last to drop my weight on my wife’s body and beg, “Wake up, Elaine. I’m so frightened.”

I told her of the centuries coming when our names would be forgotten, of the millennia when our nation would be a myth and our continent an ocean, of the aeons when our earth would have vanished and the stars themselves be diffused into a uniform and irreversible cold. As, an hour before, I had transferred my lust to her, so now I tried to pass my fear into her. It seemed to offend her sense of good taste that I was jealous of future aeons and frantic because I couldn’t live through them; she asked me if I had never been so sick I gave up caring whether I lived or died. This contemptible answer—animal stoicism—acquired a curious reinforcement: eventually, just as I had during the birth of my first child, I fell asleep. In my dreams, I was back in high school, with people I hadn’t seen for years.

The next day, a Saturday, was my birthday. It passed like any day except that underneath the camouflage of furniture and voices and habitual actions I felt death like a wide army advancing. The newspaper told of nothing but atrocities. My children, wounded and appalled in their competition, came to me to be comforted and I was dismayed to see myself, a gutted shell, appearing to them as the embodiment and pledge of a safe universe. Friends visited, and for the first time truly in my life I realized that each face is suppressing knowledge of an immense catastrophe; our faces are dams that wrinkle under the strain.

Around six the telephone rang. It was my mother calling from Pennsylvania. I assumed she had called because of my birthday, so I chattered humorously about the discomforts of growing old for a minute before she could tell me, her voice growing faint, the news. My father was in the hospital. He had been walking around with chest pains for two weeks and suffered shortness of breath at night. She had finally coaxed him into a doctor’s office; the doctor had taken a cardiogram and driven him straight to the hospital. He was a seriously sick man.

Instantly I was relieved. All day death had been advancing under cover and now it had struck, declared its position. My father had engaged the enemy and it would be defeated.

I was restored to crisp health in the play-world of action. That night we had a few friends in for my birthday party, and the next day I took the two older children to Sunday school and went myself to church. The faintly violet lozenge-panes of the tall white windows glowed and dimmed fitfully. It was a spottily overcast day, spitting a little snow. While I was at church my wife had cooked a lamb dinner. As I drank the coffee it became clear that I must drive to Pennsylvania. My mother and I had agreed I would fly down and visit him in a few days; I would have to see about renting a car at the Philadelphia end. This was potentially awkward because, self-employed, I had no credit card. The awkwardness suddenly seemed easy to surmount. I would drive. The car would be traded in a few days; it had just been greased; I had a vision of escaping our foul New England spring by driving south. In half an hour my bag was packed. *Run on home*.

Along Route 128 I picked up a young sailor who rode with me all the way to New York and, for two hours through Connecticut, drove my car. I trusted him. He had the full body, the frank and fleshy blue-eyed face of the docile Titans—guileless, competent, mildly earnest—that we have fattened, an ocean removed from the slimming Latin passions and Nordic anxieties of Europe, on our unprecedented abundance of milk and honey, vitamins and protein. He was incongruously—and somehow reassuringly—tanned. He had got the tan in Key West, where he had spent twenty-four hours, hitching the rides to and from on Navy jets. He had spent the twenty-four hours sleeping on the beach and selecting souvenirs to send back to his parents and girlfriend. His parents lived in Salem, his girlfriend in Peabody. He wanted to marry her, but his parents had old-fashioned ideas, they thought he was too young. And a lot of these guys in the service say, Don’t get married, don’t ever get married. But she was a nice girl, not so pretty or anything, but really nice: he really wouldn’t mind marrying her.

I asked him how old he was. He was twenty-two, and was being trained as an airplane mechanic. He wanted at the end of his hitch to come back to Salem and live. He figured an airplane mechanic could find some sort of job. I told him, with a paternal firmness that amazed my ears, to marry her; absolutely; his parents would get used to it. The thing about parents, I told him, was that secretly, no matter what you did, they liked you anyway. I told him I had married at the age of twenty-one and had never been sorry.

He asked me, “What do you do? Teach?”

This impressed me. My grandfather had been a teacher, and my father was a teacher, and from my childhood up it had been assumed by people that I in turn would become a teacher.

“No,” I said. “I’m a writer.”

He seemed less offended than puzzled. “What do you write?”

“Oh—whatever comes into my head.”

“What’s the point?”

“I don’t know,” I told him. “I wish I did. Maybe there are several points.”

We talked less freely after that. At his request I left him off in wet twilight at a Texaco station near the entrance of the New Jersey Turnpike. He hoped to get a ride from there all the way to Washington. Other sailors were clustered out of the rain in the doorways of the station. They hailed him as if they had been waiting for him, and as he went to them he became, from the back, just one more sailor, anonymous, at sea. He did not turn and wave goodbye. I felt I had frightened him, which I regretted, because he had driven for me very well and I wanted him to marry his girl. In the dark I drove down the pike alone. In the first years of my car, when we lived in Manhattan, it would creep up to seventy-five on this wide black stretch without our noticing; now the needle found its natural level at sixty. The windshield wipers beat, and the wonderland lights of the Newark refineries were swollen and broken like bubbles by the raindrops on the side windows. For a dozen seconds a cross of blinking stars was suspended in the upper part of the windshield: an airplane above me was coming in to land.

I did not eat until I was on Pennsylvania soil. The Howard Johnsons in Pennsylvania are cleaner, less crowded, more homelike in their furnishings. The decorative plants seem to be honestly growing, and the waitresses have just a day ago removed the Mennonite cap from their hair, which is still pulled into a smooth bun flattering to their pallid, sly faces. They served me with that swift grace that comes in a region where food is still one of the pleasures. The familiar and subtle irony of their smiles wakened in me that old sense, of Pennsylvania knowingness—of knowing, that is, that the truth is good. They were the innkeeper’s daughters, God had given us crops, and my wagon was hitched outside.

When I returned to the car, the music on the radio had changed color. The ersatz hiccup and gravel of Atlantic Seaboard hillbilly had turned, inland, backwards into something younger. As I passed the Valley Forge intersection the radio played a Benny Goodman quintet that used to make my scalp freeze. The speedometer went up to seventy without effort.

I left the toll road for our local highway and, slowing to turn into our dirt road, I was nearly rammed from behind by a pair of headlights that had been pushing, Pennsylvania style, six feet behind me. I parked beside my father’s car in front of the barn. My mother came unseen into the yard, and, two voices calling in the opaque drizzle, while the dogs yapped deliriously in their pen, we debated whether I should move my car farther off the road. “Out of harm’s way,” my grandfather would have said. Complaining, I obeyed her. My mother turned as I carried my suitcase down the path of sandstone steppingstones, and led me to the back door as if I would not know the way. So it was not until we were inside the house that I could kiss her in greeting. She poured us two glasses of wine. Wine had a ceremonial significance in our family; we drank it seldom. My mother seemed cheerful, even silly, and it took an hour for the willed good cheer to ebb away. She turned her head and looked delicately at the rug, and the side of her neck reddened as she told me, “Daddy says he’s lost all his faith.”

“Oh, my.” Since I had also lost mine, I could find nothing else to say. I remembered, in the silence, a conversation I had had with my father during a vacation from college. With the habitual simplicity of his eagerness to know, he had asked me, “Have you ever had any doubts of the existence of a Divine Being?”

“Sure,” I had answered.

“I never have,” he said. “It’s beyond my ability to imagine it. The divinity of Jesus, yes; but the existence of a Divine Being, never.” He stated this not as an attempt to influence me, but as a moderately curious fact he had that moment discovered about himself.

“He never was much one for faith,” my mother added, hurt by my failure to speak. “He was strictly a works man.”

I slept badly; I missed my wife’s body, that weight of memory, beside me. I was enough of a father to feel lost out of my nest of little rustling souls. I kept looking out of the windows. The three red lights of the chimneys of the plant that had been built some miles away, to mine low-grade iron ore, seemed to be advancing over our neighbor’s ridged field toward our farm. My mother had mistaken me for a stoic like my father and had not put enough blankets on the bed. I found an old overcoat of his and arranged it over me; its collar scratched my chin. I tipped into sleep and awoke. The morning was sharply sunny; sheep hustled, heads toppling, through the gauzy blue sky. It was authentic spring in Pennsylvania. Some of the grass in the lawn had already grown shiny and lank. A yellow crocus had popped up beside the BEWARE OF THE DOG sign my father had had an art student at the high school make for him.

I insisted we drive to Alton in my car, and then was sorry, for it seemed to insult their own. Just a few months ago my father had traded in on yet one more second-hand car: now he owned a ’53 Dodge. But while growing up I had been ambushed by so many mishaps in my father’s cars that I insisted we take the car I could trust. Or perhaps it was that I did not wish to take my father’s place behind the wheel of his car. My father’s place was between me and Heaven; I was afraid of being placed adjacent to that far sky. First we visited his doctor. Our old doctor, a man who believed that people simply “wore out” and nothing could be done about it, had several years ago himself worn out and died. The new doctor’s office, in the center of the city, was furnished with a certain raw sophistication. Rippling music leaked from the walls, which were hung with semi-professional oils. He himself was a wiry and firm-tongued young man not much older than myself but venerable with competence and witnessed pain. Such are the brisk shepherds who hop us over the final stile. He brought down from the top of a filing cabinet a plaster model of the human heart. “Your own heart,” he told me, “is nice and thin like this; but your dad’s heart is enlarged. We believe the obstruction is here, in one of these little vessels on the outside, luckily for your dad.”

Outside, in the streets of Alton, my own heart felt enlarged. A white sun warmed the neat façades of painted brick; chimneys red like peony shoots thrust through budding treetops. Having grown accustomed to the cramped, improvised cities of New England, I was impressed, like a tourist, by Alton’s straight broad streets and handsome institutions. While my mother went off to buy my daughter a birthday present—April was nearly upon us—I returned a book she had borrowed from the Alton Public Library. I had forgotten the deep aroma of that place, mixed of dust and cleaning fluid and binder’s glue and pastry baking in the bakery next door. Revisiting the shelf of P. G. Wodehouse that I had once read straight through, I took down *Mulliner Nights* and looked in the back for the stamped date, in ’47 or ’48, that would be me. I never thought to look for the section of the shelves where my own few books would be placed. They were not me. They were my children, touchy and self-willed.

In driving to the hospital on Alton’s outskirts, we passed the museum grounds, where every tree and flower-bed wore a name-tag and black swans drifted through flotillas of crumbled bread. As a child I had believed literally that bread cast upon the waters came back doubled. Within the museum there were mummies with lips snarling back from their teeth in astonishment; a tiny gilt chair for a baby pharaoh; an elephant tusk carved into hundreds of tiny Chinamen and pagodas and squat leafy trees; miniature Eskimo villages that you lit up with a switch and peeped into like an Easter egg; cases of arrowheads; rooms of stuffed birds; and, upstairs, dower chests decorated with hearts and unicorns and tulips by the pious “plain people,” and iridescent glassware from the kilns of Baron von Steigel, and slashing paintings of Pennsylvania woodland by the Shearer brothers, and bronze statuettes of wrestling Indians that stirred my first erotic dreams, and, in the round skylit room at the head of the marble stairs, a black-rimmed pool in whose center a naked green girl held to her pursed lips a shell whose transparent contents forever spilled from the other side, filling this whole vast upstairs—from whose Palladian windows the swans in their bready pond could be seen trailing fan-shaped wakes—with the trickle and splatter of falling water. The world then seemed to me an intricate wonder displayed for my delight with no price asked. Visible above the trees across the pond were rose glints of the hospital, an orderly multitude of tall brick rectangles set among levelled and well-tended grounds, an ideal city of the ill.

I had forgotten how grand the Alton hospital was. I had not seen its stately entrance, approached down a grassy mall, since, at the age of eight, I had left the hospital unburdened of my tonsils. Then, too, it had been spring, and the mall was bright with the first flush of green, and my mother was with me. I recalled it to her, and she said, “I felt so guilty. You were so sick.”

“Really? I remember it as so pleasant.” They had put a cup of pink rubber over my nose and there had been a thunderous flood of the smell of cotton candy and I opened my eyes and my mother was reading a magazine beside my bed.

“You were such a hopeful good boy,” my mother said, and I did not look at her face for fear of seeing her crying.

I wondered aloud if a certain girl in my high-school class was still a nurse here.

“Oh, dear,” my mother said. “Here I thought you came all this way to see your poor old father and all you care about is seeing—” And she used the girl’s maiden name, though the girl had been married as long as I had.

Within the hospital, she surprised me by knowing the way. Usually, wherever we went, it was my father or I who knew the way. As I followed her through the linoleum maze, my mother’s shoulders seemed already to have received the responsible shawl of widowhood. Like the halls of a palace, the hospital corridors were lined with petitioners, waiting for a verdict. Negro girls electrically dramatic in their starched white uniforms folded bales of cotton sheets; gray men pushed wrung mops. We went past an exit sign, down a stairway, into a realm where gaunt convalescents in bathrobes shuffled in and out of doorways. I saw my father diagonally through a doorway before we entered his room. He was sitting up in bed, supported sultanlike by a wealth of pillows and clad in red-striped pajamas.

I had never seen him in pajamas before; a great man for the shortest distance between two points, he slept in his underclothes. But, having been at last captured in pajamas, like a big-hearted lion he did not try to minimize his subdual, but lay fully exposed, without a sheet covering even his feet. Bare, they looked pale, thin-skinned, and oddly unused.

Except for a sullen lymphatic glow under his cheeks, his face was totally familiar. I had been afraid that his loss of faith would show, like the altered shape of his mouth after he had had all his teeth pulled. With grins we exchanged the shy handshake that my going off to college had forced upon us. I sat on the windowsill by his bed, my mother took the chair at the foot of the bed, and my father’s roommate, a fortyish man flat on his back with a ruptured disc, sighed and blew smoke toward the ceiling and tried, I suppose, not to hear us. Our conversation, though things were radically changed, followed old patterns. Quite quickly the talk shifted from him to me. “I don’t know how you do it, David,” he said. “I couldn’t do what you’re doing if you paid me a million dollars a day.” Embarrassed and flattered, as usual, I tried to shush him, and he disobediently turned to his roommate and called loudly, “I don’t know where the kid gets his ideas. Not from his old man, I know that. I never gave the poor kid an idea in my life.”

“Sure you did,” I said softly, trying to take pressure off the man with the hurting back. “You taught me two things. One, always butter bread toward the edges because enough gets in the middle anyway; and, two, no matter what happens to you, it’ll be a new experience.”

To my dismay, this seemed to make him melancholy. “That’s right, David,” he said. “No matter what happens to you, it’ll be a new experience. The only thing that worries me is that *she*“—he pointed at my mother—”will crack up the car. I don’t want anything to happen to your mother.”

“The car, you mean,” my mother said, and to me she added, “It’s a sin, the way he worships that car.”

My father didn’t deny it. “Jesus, I love that car,” he said. “It’s the first car I’ve ever owned that didn’t go bad on me. Remember all those heaps we used to ride back and forth in?”

The old Chevy was always getting dirt in the fuel pump and refusing to start. Once, going down Firetown Hill, the left front wheel had broken off the axle; my father wrestled with the steering wheel while the tires screamed and the white posts of the guard fence floated toward my eyes. When the car slid sideways to a stop just short of the embankment, my father’s face was stunned and the corners of his mouth dribbled saliva. I was surprised; it had not occurred to me to be frightened. The ’36 Buick had drunk oil, a quart every fifty miles, and liked to have flat tires after midnight, when I would be sailing home with a scrubbed brain and the smell of lipstick in my nose. Once, when we had both gone into town and I had dropped him off and taken the car, I had absent-mindedly driven home alone. I came in the door and my mother said, “Why, where’s your father?”

My stomach sank. “My Lord,” I said, “I forgot I had him!”

As, smiling, I took in breath and prepared to dip with him into reminiscence of these adventures, my father, staring stonily into the air above his pale and motionless toes, said, “I love this place. There are a lot of wonderful gentlemen in here. The only thing that worries me is that Mother will crack up the car.”

My mother was leaning forward pink-faced in the chair at the foot of the bed, trying to smile. He glanced at her and said to me, “It’s a funny feeling. The night before we went to see the doctor, I woke up and couldn’t get my breath and realized I wasn’t ready to die. I had always thought I would be. It’s a funny feeling.”

“Luckily for your dad,” “all his faith,” “wonderful gentlemen”: these phrases were borne in on me, and my tongue seemed pressed flat on the floor of its grave. The pajama stripes under my eyes stirred and streamed, real blood. I wanted to speak, to say how I still needed him and to beg him not to leave me, but there were no words, no form of words available in our tradition. A pillar of smoke poured upward from the sighing man in the other bed.

Into this pit hesitantly walked a plain, painfully clean girl with a pad and pencil. She had yellow hair, thick lips, and, behind pink-rimmed glasses, large eyes that looked as if they had been corrected from being crossed. They flicked across our faces and focused straight ahead in that tunnel-vision gaze of those who know perfectly well they are figures of fun; the Jehovah’s Witnesses who come to the door wear that guarded expression. She approached the bed where my father lay barefoot and, suppressing a stammer, explained that she was from Lutheran Home Missions and that they kept accounts of all hospitalized Lutherans and notified the appropriate pastors to make visitations. Perhaps she had measured my father for a rebuff. Perhaps her eyes, more practiced in this respect than mine, spotted the external signs of loss of faith that I couldn’t see. At any rate my father was a Lutheran by adoption; he had been born and raised a Presbyterian and still looked like one.

“That’s *aw*fully nice of you,” he told the girl. “I don’t see how you people do it on the little money we give you.”

Puzzled, she dimpled and moved ahead with her routine. “Your church is—?”

He told her, pronouncing every syllable meticulously and consulting my mother and me as to whether the word “Evangelical” figured in the official title.

“That would make your pastor Reverend—”

“Yeah. He’ll be in, don’t worry about it. Wild horses couldn’t keep him away. Nothing he likes better than to get out of the sticks and drive into Alton. I didn’t mean to confuse you a minute ago; what I meant was, just last week in church council we were talking about you people. We couldn’t figure out how you do anything on the little money we give you. After we’ve got done feeding the furnace and converting the benighted Hindu there isn’t anything left over for you people that are trying to help the poor devils in our own back yard.”

The grinning girl was lost in this onslaught of praise and clung to the shreds of her routine. “In the meantime,” she recited, “here is a pamphlet you might like to read.”

My father took it from her with a swooping gesture so expansive I got down from the windowsill to restrain him physically, if necessary. That he must lie still was my one lever, my one certainty about his situation. “That’s awfully nice of you,” he told the girl. “I don’t know where the hell you get the money to print these things.”

“We hope your stay in the hospital is pleasant and would like to wish you a speedy recovery to full health.”

“Thank you; I know you’re sincere when you say it. As I was telling my son David here, if I can do what the doctors tell me I’ll be all right. First time in my life I’ve ever tried to do what anybody ever told me to do. The kid was just telling me, ‘No matter what happens to you, Pop, it’ll be a new experience.’ ”

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have other calls to pay.”

“Of course. You go right ahead, sick Lutherans are a dime a dozen. You’re a wonderful woman to be doing what you’re doing.”

And she left the room transformed into just that. As a star shines in our Heaven though it has vanished from the universe, so my father continued to shed faith upon others. For the remainder of my visit with him his simple presence so reassured me, filled me with such a buoyant humor, that my mother surprised me, when we had left the hospital, by remarking that we had tired him.

“I hadn’t noticed,” I said.

“And it worries me,” she went on, “the way he talks about the movies all the time. You know he never liked them.” When I had offered to stay another night so I could visit him again, he had said, “No, instead of that why don’t you take your mother tomorrow to the movies?” Rather than do that, I said, I would drive home. It took him a moment, it seemed, to realize that by my home I meant a far place, where I had a wife and children, dental appointments and work obligations. Though at the time I was impatient to have his consent to leave, it has since occurred to me that during that instant when his face was blank he was swallowing the realization that he could die and my life would go on. Having swallowed, he told me how good I had been to come all this way to see him. He told me I was a good son and a good father; he clasped my hand. I felt I would ascend straight north from his touch.

I drove my mother back to her farm and got my bag and said goodbye on the lawn. The little sandstone house was pink in the declining sunlight; the lawn was a tinkling clutter of shy rivulets. Standing beside the BEWARE OF THE DOG sign with its companion of a crocus, she smiled and said, “This is like when you were born. Your father drove through a snowstorm all the way from Wheeling in our old Model A.” He had been working with the telephone company then; the story of his all-night ride was the oldest narrative in which I was a character.

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Darkness did not fall until New Jersey. The hour of countryside I saw from the Pennsylvania Turnpike looked enchanted—the branches of the trees underpainted with budding russet, the meadows nubbled like new carpets, the bronze sun slanting on Valley Forge and Levittown alike. I do not know what it is that is so welcome to me in the Pennsylvania landscape, but it is the same quality—perhaps of reposing in the certainty that the truth is good—that exists in Pennsylvania faces. It seemed to me for this sunset hour that the world is our bride, given to us to love, and the terror and joy of the marriage is that we bring to it a nature not our bride’s.

There was no sailor to help me drive the nine hours back. New Jersey began in twilight and ended in darkness, and Manhattan made its gossamer splash at show-time hour, eight o’clock. The rest of the trip was more and more steeply uphill. The Merritt Parkway seemed meaninglessly coquettish, the light-controlled stretch below Hartford maddeningly obstinate, and the hour above that frighteningly empty. Distance grew thicker and thicker; the intricate and effortful mechanics of the engine, the stellar infinity of explosive sparks needed to drive it, passed into my body, and wearied me. Repeatedly I stopped for coffee and the hallucinatory comfort of human faces, and after every stop my waiting car, companion and haven and willing steed, responded to my pressure. It began to seem a miracle that the car could gather speed from my numb foot; the very music on the radio seemed a drag on our effort, and I turned it off, obliterating earthly time. We climbed through a space fretted by scattered brilliance and bathed in a monotonous wind. I had been driving forever; houses, furniture, churches, women were all things I had innocently dreamed. And through those aeons my car, beginning as a mechanical assembly of molecules, evolved into something soft and organic and consciously brave. I lost first heart, then head, and finally any sense of my body. In the last hour of the trip I ceased to care or feel or in any real sense see, but the car, though its soul the driver had died, maintained steady forward motion, and completed the journey safely. Above my back yard the stars were frozen in place, and the shapes of my neighbors’ houses wore the wonder that children induce by whirling.

Any day now we will trade it in; we are just waiting for the phone to ring. I know how it will be. My father traded in many cars. It happens so cleanly, before you expect it. He would drive off in the old car up the dirt road exactly as usual, and when he returned the car would be new to us, and the old was gone, gone, utterly dissolved back into the mineral world from which it was conjured, dismissed without a blessing, a kiss, a testament, or any ceremony of farewell. We in America need ceremonies, is I suppose, sailor, the point of what I have written.

# TO WILLIAM MAXWELL

*In revenge, however, my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more. I could have returned at first, had human beings allowed it, through an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth, but as I spurred myself on in my forced career, the opening narrowed and shrank behind me; I felt more comfortable in the world of men and fitted it better; the strong wind that blew after me out of my past began to slacken; today it is only a gentle puff of air that plays around my heels; and the opening in the distance, through which it comes and through which I once came myself, has grown so small that, even if my strength and my will power sufficed to get me back to it, I should have to scrape the very skin from my body to crawl through*.

—KAFKA, *“A Report to an Academy”*